Things I've Learned Essays

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Having taken on the role of Vice President for Research (VPR) at the University of Minnesota more than a year ago, I am occasionally asked to share, "What have you learned?" It's not a question that is entirely straightforward to answer, as I'm not sure that I've had any particular epiphany attributable purely to having begun serving as a senior University official. On the other hand, I've definitely had occasion to see my prior learning, if you will, either strongly reinforced, or else expanded in directions that I'd not previously appreciated quite so much.

One thing I hope that I've always known is the importance of mentorship. As a chemistry professor who has for 25+ years run a moderately sized research group, I've always been committed to helping my co-workers not only to expand their theoretical chemistry prowess (my field of expertise), but also to grow their other professional skills, in order to prepare them for their next positions and launch them towards ever greater success. Upon becoming VPR, I was a bit surprised at how often I was approached for mentorship, and I confess to some degree of discomfort initially, as I was reluctant to represent that I had somehow dramatically increased my stock of wisdom over the course of only a few weeks or months in the position! And then there is also the desire not to succumb to the hubris of believing that one's new role has somehow rendered one vastly more qualified to offer advice than others (a desire felt all the more keenly by a Minnesotan, I hasten to add).

This point having been made, and bearing always in mind the importance of embracing a little humility, I'm going to take the opportunity to document a few of the things that I have learned over the last 15 months or so that I believe have made positive contributions to my own personal progress, and concomitantly advanced the missions of my office and its support to the University of Minnesota. What follows are 5 topical "micro-essays", perforce interconnected in various ways, but presented in rough order of relevance to time in a new senior leadership position.

1. Set Foundational Structure

Irrespective of how "important" you have become, and how many individuals' actions will now ultimately derive from your plans and directives, there is still only one of you. That means that you will simply never have the time needed to provide clarifying detail if you broadcast plans and priorities that are ambiguous, uncertain, or, heaven forbid, simply absent! To ensure coherence across your organization, it is critical to articulate as clearly as possible a few, key priorities, and then repeat them over, and over, and over again. You, of course, will become sick of hearing yourself say them, but you should bear in mind that those to whom you are speaking will typically *not* have heard them multiple times, and even if they have, it's a sufficient small multiple that the effect is to help reinforce the primacy of those priorities as opposed to inspire ennui.

How many is a few? For me it's three. Three is a canonical number that ideally compromises between how much we'd really *like* to do and how much we actually *can* do without hopelessly diffusing our efforts. Thus, when I began as VPR, I picked for my office 3 values (Partnership; Discovery; Integrity), 3 strategic priorities (Enhance Research Excellence; Promote and Sustain Research Integrity; Accelerate the Transfer of Knowledge for the Public Good), and finally 3 tactical objectives (Sustainability in the Face of Global Climate Change; Data Science and Informatics; Clinical Investigations and Studies). Every time I begin a presentation, my first slide is the OVPR values slide. Every time I speak about a given OVPR activity, I tie it to a strategic priority and/or a tactical objective.

For units outside my organization, I consider there to be two reasons to be didactic about this. First, it offers some opportunity, ideally, to nudge *them* into alignment, assuming that they are looking for a partnership with OVPR. More importantly, though, it simply illustrates that there is a *plan*, an articulated framework that is guiding our operations. It's hard for potential partners to have confidence in you if you don't seem to have a plan, or some measure of predictability. And, to be frank, it actually imposes a very useful discipline on *me* to hew closely to priorities and tactics, as I don't give in to temptations to wander intellectually while making presentations, and instead keep them "on message", ensuring that I'm using the time that I have to get my points across to *this* audience most effectively. While it may at first appear that a 3x3x3 bed of values, priorities, and tactics is bound to be unhelpfully Procrustean, that is only true if one fails to choose their associated scopes to be sufficiently broad individually—but not *too* broad, lest they lose all guiding force! The Goldilocks principle applies.

Meanwhile, constant repetition to the units *inside* my organization ensures that when they come to me with budget proposals, ideas for new initiatives, etc., they pitch them in the context of those values, priorities, and tactics, and that helps me to make decisions that are less likely to appear capricious or inscrutable. If I need to seek external support to advance those same initiatives, again, it is (i) clear that we have a plan and (ii) clear that we have prioritized any request(s) adherent to an articulable set of principles.

2. Be Volubly Transparent (and Be Biased Towards Helpfulness)

As someone at a public institution in a state with robust laws promoting access to public information, I'm sufficiently used to so much being wide open for scrutiny that I've come to embrace the positive aspects of that. Certainly, it helps to tamp down the inevitable rumors and conspiracy theories endemic to large organizations when all are provided with as much background and communication as they can handle. That said, there is transparency, and there is *voluble* transparency. What distinguishes the latter is the desire to impart a message more broadly than it might otherwise be expected to travel. Thus, for example, when I want to take on a project that I know will have some level of controversy associated with it, I start talking about my thoughts about doing so well in advance, and make sure that audiences who will have an interest in the project are aware, and feel consulted. If done with sufficient frequency and consistency, there is occasionally the benefit of the *proposed* project becoming so familiar to people that the actual undertaking is considered a *fait accompli*. Such a situation is, obviously, vastly to be preferred to the alternative (seen all too frequently in academia, I submit), where an insufficiently transparent project is halted midway through by the cries of outrage it inspires from multiple parties surprised to discover it still halfway along. (I'm assiduously avoiding offering any specific examples here lest the subterfuge of my methods to advance them be revealed to any senior colleagues who may have gotten to this point…)

Of course, pursuing the volubly transparent approach sometimes means moving more slowly than one might like, and there *are* occasions where circumstances dictate that one take a controversial decision *without* the opportunity to be so forthcoming about it. In such cases, one simply has to take the associated heat and, hopefully be sufficiently transparent in explaining the *necessity* of action to mitigate in part the annoyance of those parties unhappy to have been surprised.

Implicit in much of the above discussion is a recognition of the default suspicion with which most administrative actions are viewed by the majority of those who comprise the academy. One could spill a great deal of ink tying this predisposition to the changed character of higher education over the last several decades, and the inevitable tensions that have been created between those subscribing to the "university as a business" vs the "university as an idyllic community of scholars" schools of thought. I leave that ink to my talented colleagues with relevant scholarly expertise, however. I'll confine myself simply to noting that one way to avoid being viewed with suspicion is to establish a record of being actually helpful. Disarmingly simple, no? Whenever I meet with an individual, I try to ensure that at some point in the conversation, I ask, "Where do you interact most with my office, and have you experienced any difficulties or bottlenecks that we should work on? What can we do to best assist you in your future plans?" If points are raised, I take them back with me, discuss them with relevant members of my team, and I follow up with the individual. Either we can make improvements (hooray! we learned something!) or perhaps we cannot, but there is a good reason for *why* we cannot that I can hopefully explain to the individual (and, perhaps through them it will indeed percolate more broadly, e.g., a federal regulation that precludes alternatives that would otherwise be more convenient).

As an aside to close this section, sometimes when one asks how one's organization is doing, one receives not a complaint but instead praise for one or more aspects of the office's work, sometimes with specific people being mentioned. When I return from a meeting, I generally try to write up a summary of my conversations (more on that in another section), but I *always* make a point to write up expressions of gratitude and transmit them to the individuals responsible (and their supervisors, where appropriate). We are far too stingy with praise in the academy, and one should never fail to take the opportunity to boost someone's morale by passing on that their good work has been noticed.

3. Get Out of Your Office — A Lot

An unusual feature of becoming a senior university officer is that suddenly a lot of people consider it a privilege to have you present. (I mean, ok, not *faculty*, of course, but a lot of *other* people.) This means that invitations to visit, speak, welcome, etc., will abound. While it *is* possible to say "yes" too frequently, such that one's entire schedule becomes figurehead appearances, my advice is to err on the side of being out of one's office somewhat more often than in.

Why? Well, there are several good reasons to devote a hefty amount of time to being out and about. First, it's a surprisingly easy way to earn goodwill. Odd though it may feel to embrace the idea that one's mere presence — for 5 minutes to welcome the Society of Inscrutable Academicians to its annual meeting, held this year for the first time here! — somehow adds a value that would not otherwise have accrued to the assemblage, there *are* those who appreciate the official imprimatur. Second, and I'll argue far more importantly, it's your best opportunity to *learn* things, and to do so in a way that samples the vastness of your institution. Because, frankly, very few other people have the time or opportunity to do exactly that, but there are often connections that can be built between people or units that are unaware of each others' activities that can add tremendous value to the work of both. Very few things have been as rewarding to me as have chances, when visiting some research group, for example, to say, "What you've described is so interesting! Were you aware that Prof. X in department Y is working on Z, and it seems as though that would offer an opportunity to test your idea W in a potentially novel arena impacting Q?" In several instances, now, those connections that I've been able to broker have launched new collaborations with exciting outcomes.

That last example involves individual research groups. I try to visit such groups at least once every two weeks or so. While it's admittedly only rarely that I get to add value through my knowledge of a possible new connection, it's *always* true that I get to expand my personal knowledge of the research being pursued at the University of Minnesota, and that's incredibly intellectually stimulating. It also sends a message that a senior administrator *cares* enough to drop by individuals groups — and meets students and postdocs and asks about where they came from, and what they're doing now, and where they're going in the future. I try to frequent departmental, collegiate, center-, and University-wide poster sessions as well, to meet the students and hear about what they're doing. The more chances I have to learn about the variety of research projects under way, the greater the likelihood that on some legislative or industrial visit I'll be able to say, "Ah, yes, that is indeed an important topic – did you know that the University is doing work in that area, and in particular <relevant person/group> is studying <specific topic>?" If that leads to a productive follow-up, so much the better.

Speaking of government and industry, the modern university simply must pay attention to strong external engagement. That's another reason that sampling broadly, both internal and external to one's own unit at the university, is terrifically important. Because of the scale of the modern research university, a given company (to focus on industry, for a moment) will often have a variety of connections, perhaps no one of which is aware of another. This can give rise to the terrifically frustrating phenomenon of hearing from, say, the President of the university that she met that company's CEO somewhere and was told "I don't think we're doing anything with the University", when in fact there are dozens of specific interactions scattered hither and yon. Of course, good corporate engagement means that there is actually an *office* somewhere that manages the collection of data to address this misperception, there remains a great deal to be said for being able to personally recount it when opportunities arise, and for that there is no substitute for the personal experience of talking with those engaged in the actual collaborations.

To wrap this section up, I'll close with something perhaps obvious, but also sometimes difficult to undertake for a proud administrator: ask lots of questions. Why would that be hard? Well, as an accomplished academic (presumably) it can be hard to look, er… dumb. If you visit researchers doing work in fields vastly different than your own, perforce you will occasionally have very little prior appreciation for their field(s). And the only way you will remedy that is to ask questions that you are sure will come across as naïve. Good news! In my experience, most researchers are not taken aback that you are not already as expert as they — to the contrary, they are delighted to be able to introduce you to the fundamentals of their field and then help you to see how what they are doing is expanding the frontiers of that field. This is *especially* true when you are talking to students, because they typically remember well when *they* were equally clueless about the question you are asking, and they are thrilled to now be sufficiently expert to educate you. They gain self-confidence while you gain knowledge, which is surely a most excellent trade.

4. Embrace Delegation and Trust

Something that certainly takes getting used to at the highest levels of administration — at least it did for me — is staff (great staff, by the way) being surprised when you *do* something, as opposed to directing someone else to do it. Most of us who rise through the ranks, as it were, dedicated a whole lot of time to *doing*. But, the weird logic at play here is that you are now in charge of an organization so large that if you insist on personally managing any particular piece, you are likely to slow down progress in other pieces because you don't have the time to give them the attention they need.

This can be quite the challenge. One runs the risk of feeling like a dilettante, as people come to you for decisions and guidance and, like a batter facing a pitching machine throwing in 30-minute intervals, you absorb all you can and take your best shot before moving on to the next pitch/meeting. So, how best to get past that feeling of not being on top of absolutely everything, and thus being a complete fraud (although maybe that's just the imposter syndrome talking)?

Well, step 1 is to recognize you actually probably don't *have* the capacity you'd need to be expert at everything. For example, as VPR, I am the Institutional Official responsible for the protection of human research participants. That's a critically important function, but even though I took all the necessary training, that training is simply no substitute for an entire professional career's worth of experience *engaged* with research with human participants. So, the only real choice is to be sure that one has a co-worker – multiple co-workers, really, although the chain-of-command concept suggests that the top level executive authority will be invested in only one – who is delegated the requisite authority to manage that task at the highest level of professionalism. Importantly, it's not enough to simply delegate one's authority to a co-worker — it's equally critical to empower that individual by making clear that you *trust* them to act independently as they need to, and that you will support their decisions should the need arise, because if they have to come to you first before *making* any decisions, you will have accomplished nothing in terms of efficiency and accelerating the operations of your unit.

That entails some acceptance of risk, which can be hard, especially for academics, who are used to exercising a high degree of autonomy and control. You have to accustom yourself as a leader to the realization that you are surrounded by people who are more expert than you at the tasks that they manage, and indeed you have to be certain to accomplish your hiring, as you fill open positions, with exactly that in mind!

This is also why it is so important to have the well-articulated framework of values, priorities, and objectives that I've already discussed above. At some point, you will have goals for a subordinate unit but will not necessarily be as expert as your direct report with respect to how to go about achieving those goals. As long as you are confident, however, in a shared understanding of the organization's framework, you will have little trouble accepting recommendations for how to proceed leveraging that person's deeper knowledge of their own area. This vastly multiplies your ability to effect change (hopefully positive change!) throughout your organization, even if you occasionally feel as though you are personally engaged miles wide but only inches deep…

5. Share Information and Also Credit

An executive summary of micro-essay 3 of this series might be “Knowledge is Power”. Well, if that is the case, surely it is a good idea to empower your organization broadly through the wide dissemination of knowledge. I’ve emphasized how rewarding it has been for me when I’ve had the opportunity to broker connections because I saw the possibility thanks to unique opportunities to learn about different activities, but it is absolutely the case that in other instances the chances for connection were revealed when I shared something that *I* knew with a co-worker who was aware of the *other* side of the equation. Thus, my advice is, be generous in sharing information internally within your organization. Even when it may not seem that it will be relevant, at the very worst it indicates to people what you have been doing, where you have been spending your time, what are the most recent activities in ongoing operations. As I’ve already noted above, after an important meeting – particularly if it’s one with another senior leader of the organization or the President – I often write up a summary to share with my senior leadership team so that everyone is up to speed on what’s on my plate, as well as their own.

I would assert that this goes beyond keeping one’s own senior leadership team in the loop on all activities. There is great value in offering snapshots of the organization’s work when speaking to *any* audience. For external audiences, it helps maintain an understanding of what you do, while for internal audiences, it helps all members of the team feel as though they are contributing to a whole of which their part is an important contribution.

Indeed, to that last point, it is vital to have an internal communication strategy that keeps all staff as up-to-date as possible with respect to organizational objectives, and how their contributions are helping to achieve them. It certainly *is* possible to overcommunicate, but in my experience most leaders err on the other side, leaving some in their organizations feeling disengaged. So, I’ve spent some time above singing the praises of getting out of the office to interact with *external* constituencies, but it’s also very important to pay attention to your internal constituencies. Is there an employee recognition event to which you’ve been invited? Take the opportunity to attend, if at all possible, and circulate to chat with as many folks as practical. Hear what they’re doing, note the importance of their work relative to the office as a whole, *see* them – and thank them! You won’t have time to do as much of this as they deserve, sadly, but it’s an important contributor to building an esprit de corps that will benefit the organization. Also be sure to thank them publically when making presentations that rely upon their contributions – you’d be surprised how many watch or otherwise learn of those presentations and appreciate having been recognized for their work.

6. Try Stuff

Speaking of thanking people, thank *you* for slogging through to this last micro-essay – the one that was advertised as being the “least” relevant to getting *started* in a senior leadership position. Indeed, I think of this as advice that applies on a sustaining basis. As succinctly put in the title, “Try Stuff”.

So, in fairness, my background is that of a physical scientist. As such, I’m pretty devoted to experiments (even if as a scholar I chose to be a theoretician – but, hey, every calculation tests a hypothesis!) The bottom line is, progress derives primarily from new ideas. So, it’s a senior leader’s job to come up with some, whether on one’s own, or through solicitation of one’s expert colleagues. A challenge, of course, is that some ideas are ultimately revealed to be, well …bad. There is a natural tendency to want to avoid the risk of being identified as the individual who pursued one of those bad ideas, even if only for a short time. And, as a result, one may succumb to a general aversion to new ideas, period.

A few weeks after our new president began, while she was speaking to an audience she referred to me as the least risk-averse senior administrator she had ever met. Needless to say (if you've gotten this far), I consider that a badge of honor!

Now, don't misunderstand – there are risks and there are risks – one does certainly have to calibrate one's appetite for risk in any endeavor based on the magnitude of the possible consequences of failure. That said, when ideas arise that may seem a little wild, but also seem to have a significant upside potential, they're generally worth trying. If you get such an idea, and you bounce it off your staff, and no one presents you with a history of precisely that concept having been tried before without success, there's the opportunity to say, "Let's give it a shot."

Giving something a shot does require some level of mindfulness, of course. Someone needs to be assigned to own the experiment, and necessary resources need to be provided to give it an opportunity to succeed (because resources are nearly *always* needed, or else, if it's a good idea, it would already be happening). In addition, one needs to prepare oneself to pull the plug if, after a judicious amount of time, the experiment is *not* looking as though it is going to be successful. Sometimes that's easy, but other times saying goodbye to sunk costs can be especially hard. Still, even if the wild ideas succeed only, say, 15% of the time, if that's budgetarily sustainable it demonstrates to those paying attention a nimble organization that is open to change

To close, while I've noted above that the novel ideas don't necessarily have to be *your* ideas, inevitably they *do* have to be someone's responsibility if they are put into action, and as also noted above, as a senior administrator you're nearly always assigning actions to *others*. As a result, it's pretty important to pay close attention to how those people to whom you're assigning things are actually doing, because even your most talented co-workers have breaking points. So, if the everyday stuff in the office is at some seasonal high, or the perfect person for your latest great idea is busy managing a small crisis, it's perfectly fine to file that idea away for a later date – the experiment will wait. It's simply good to keep thinking creatively as you manage day-to-day operations.